

Episcopal Divinity pursues affiliating with Union in New York

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

Episcopal Divinity School is planning to move to New York City.

Its leaders are negotiating an affiliation with Union Theological Seminary after EDS ceases granting degrees at its Cambridge, Massachusetts, campus at the end of this academic year.

“The board adopted several principles when we went into this process two years ago: to maintain the mission of EDS, to be financially sustainable, and [to make] no small-to-small merger,” said Gary Hall, an EDS graduate and current chair of the board of trustees. “We wanted whatever we did to take our resources and align them with a place that was robust and sustainable.”

EDS has more than \$50 million in its endowment and more than \$20 million worth of property, according to Hall. But the school was losing \$8 million a year and had only 40 students total. By ending operations before burning through more of the money, the school will be able to give more generous severance terms to the faculty and staff, Hall said.

In less than a decade, 11 theological schools that were previously independent have merged with larger schools but continue granting degrees, according to Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools. Finances were the primary issue in most cases, though sometimes the financial challenges involved the religious body backing the institution rather than the school itself. Aleshire noted that EDS’s plan resembles [the move of Andover Newton Theological School to Yale Divinity School](#) in that EDS will not continue granting degrees.

EDS students will get a degree from Union, paralleling the arrangement that Berkeley Divinity School, an Episcopal seminary, has with Yale, and EDS will offer Anglican studies instruction for Union students much as Berkeley does for Yale.

EDS is still determining how many faculty and staff it will retain but is certain it will continue in its mission.

“One of the reasons for choosing Union was the long history on both sides of social-justice orientation,” Hall said. “We want to use some of our resources for social-justice advocacy in the church and in the world.”

Union is already working with Trinity Church Wall Street, a large, well-endowed Episcopal congregation. Together the three institutions are poised to get involved in policy conversations nationally and internationally with an Anglican perspective.

Serene Jones, president of Union, saw an alignment between the culture and vision of the schools.

“The most important factor in our moving to the point where we’re having these conversations is a really profound and deeply theological sense of our shared mission,” she said. “This isn’t a partnership that [is] springing from a sense of mutual benefit in terms of infrastructure; it’s a deep sense of calling.”

Jones recalled that when she and other leaders presented the possibility of partnering with EDS, all of the school’s constituencies “were thrilled.”

Union has experienced some conflict among its constituencies in the past 18 months [over its plans to sell development rights to raise \\$100 million for legally required repairs on its campus](#). The construction that will take place on Union’s Upper Manhattan campus will include space for Union’s educational purposes, including dormitories, faculty residences, classrooms, and offices, but the rest will be private housing—the source of the objections from some students, alumni, and faculty, primarily because the housing will not be affordable for lower-income people.

Though not able to satisfy all critics, Union moved forward with the plan and was working on finalizing it in early March. Jones noted that enrollment is increasing, and Union’s operating budget has been healthy for the past decade.

That was a key part of what EDS was looking for when considering partners. The board determined it would not consider a merger with another seminary of its size, which ruled out the nine other Episcopal seminaries, including General Theological Seminary in New York City.

The concern with partnering with small schools was that EDS would expend its endowment, Hall said, “and find ourselves in a new situation with financial challenges.”

[After deciding to close](#), the board initially considered establishing a center for Abrahamic studies or funding local unaccredited Episcopal theological education programs. But the board didn't see those options as "true to the intention of the donors," Hall said. "We decided that people gave the money largely for accredited, degree-granting theological education."

Gay Clark Jennings, president of the Episcopal Church's House of Deputies and also an EDS grad, sees the school as carrying on its mission in a way that's sustainable.

"I'm really proud of my alma mater for saying, 'We're not going to remain stagnant,'" she said.

She noted that 50 years ago a report came out on the state of Episcopal theological education called *Ministry for Tomorrow*, which included the recommendations that seminaries be bold in responding to change, and particularly to look at ways to combine. A few years after that report, EDS was formed through a merger of the Philadelphia Divinity School and the Episcopal Theological School of Cambridge.

Jennings noted the diverse contexts of Episcopal ministry, not only in the United States but in more than a dozen countries such as Ecuador, Taiwan, and Switzerland.

"I think there's room for different seminaries with different approaches, even in New York City, which is a big place," she said, noting that EDS was part of a consortium in Massachusetts with Andover Newton and Harvard Divinity School. There may be opportunities along those lines in New York, including with General Theological Seminary, she said. "It enriches our various churches if we have that kind of collaboration and opportunities to learn from one another."

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